H.A.B.S. No. N.M.-18.

WATROUS HOUSE

Watrous Vicinity, Mora County, New Mexico

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Southwest District

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
John Gaw Meem, District Officer,
Camino del Monte Sol, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

WATROUS HOUSE

Watrous Vicinity, Mora County, New Mexico

Owner: C. F. Croley.

Date of Erection: Circa 1841.

Architect: Unknown; probably one commissioned.

Builder: Samuel B. Watrous.

Present Condition: Fair; very little departure from original condition; enclosing courtyard (patio) walls demolished; metal roof recently applied over original shingle roof on major portion of main building; some repair work done; no major alterations; minor alterations include some wood partitions and general repairing.

Number of stories: One.

Materials of Construction: Foundations, stone, field dressed, laid in lime mortar; floors, pine in main building, earth in barns, store-rooms, etc; walls, exterior and interior, adobe brick laid up with adobe mortar; lime plaster exterior and interior; roof, pitched shingle, metal roofing applied recently over shingles on most of main building; chimneys, adobe, faced with cut stone where exposed above roof; trim, wood, painted; ceilings, pine.

Other Existing Records: Written record, "Fifty years of change", Clark, Anna Nolan, New Mexico Magazine, February, 1938, p. p. 15-35.

Additional Data: It could not be ascertained whether an architect was employed. Construction shows evidence of having been built by a very good builder who manifested some knowledge of design. The buildings were well constructed, have very good proportions and pleasing lines. The stone work of the foundations is excellent, being well bonded and having uniform jointing properly placed. The fireplaces were constructed of adobe brick with adobe mortar, plastered, stone hearths and wood mantels in the main building; those in the east wing being native type with adobe or brick hearths, plastered. Chimneys were of adobe and were faced with cut stone where exposed above the roof. Some of the flues in the south and east wings have been repaired recently and do not have the stone facings.

The lumber, timbers, windows, doors, door and window frames, woodwork and trim, lime and other materials not easily obtainable, at or near the site, were hauled by wagon train over the Santa Fe Trail.

It is said that most of the hardware used in the buildings was hand wrought on the premises. Most of this has disappeared.

At the time the building was completed the large inner court (patio) was completely enclosed by high, thick, adobe walls, connecting the several buildings and formed a spacious court yard. These have been demolished for some unknown reason and, today, the only evidence of their existence is the plainly marked outlines of their foundations.

All the exterior doors and windows, opening to the outside of the living quarters, were equipped with heavy wooden shutters which could be closed and looked from the inside for protection against Indian raids. The ceilings were pine boards, some matched and beaded, others plain, those in rooms eight and nine being laid over beaded ceiling beams and the others being nailed to the under side of the ceiling joists.

This was one of the early houses built on the Santa Fe Trail during its flourishing days. "When the house was built the land was a province of Mexico. This was prior to the American occupation, before the coming of Kearney and his American army in 1846. At this time the Indian menace was at its deadliest. There were very few settlers. None too welcome were the scattered handful of 'Anglos'".

The following article by Anna Nolan Clark contains so much historical information that it has been included herein for its historical value and very interesting narrative of the house recorded, and the life of Samuel Watrous during the flourishing period of the old Santa Fe Trail.

"The valley, at the meeting of the Mora and Sapello rivers and called La Junta (the Junction) was the favorite hunting grounds of the wild tribes, Utes, Comanches and at times the Jicarilla Apaches. Undoubtedly Samuel Watrous knew this, but fear seems to have been left out of his make-up or he may have reasoned that the land was big enough for red man and white man. There he built his house, an immense fort-like place of 'adobe' having twenty rooms all opening on to an inner patio (enclosed courtyard). At one end was a huge store and in back of it two storerooms each twice its size. There was a granary, a meal room, a meat room, forge, family supply room, drying room, storage place for hides and one for farm implements, work

room where various crafts were carried on, and at the back were the servants' quarters. The lumber used was brought from St. Louis. All the iron work, such as hinges and bolts, was hand wrought and made on the place.

"Great swaying wagons brought safely the delicate Voss piano and the heavy mahogany and walnut pieces, marble-topped whenever possible. Hard-handed wagon men with sheepish, but eager fingers uncrated and unwrapped the flower-painted china dinner sets, alabaster ornaments, shell vases, gilded clocks and mirrors. They opened the boxes of books and admiringly fingered the embossed leather bindings and the watered silk. Brought in by Indians and pack trains from Mexico were 'Serapes' and blankets and native clay 'Ollas' and pots. Friendly Indians brought baskets to trade and for presents. The establishment hunter covered the floors with bear and buffalo hide rugs.

"On the east side of the Canadian River there was a tract of land on which cottonwoods of an uncommonly large girth grew. These Watrous had transplanted to make a shaded driveway around the house. To him this meant permanance and stability so he planted trees and trees and trees. Remembering the beautiful Vermont willows of his boyhood home, he took three months out of a busy life to make the journey back there and returned with a wagon load of willow sprouts. He sent to Stark Brothers' nursery in Missouri for other kinds. It is said of him that when there was nothing else to do he would say 'Come, now, we will plant more trees.'

"As his trees grew so did his family. There were seven children.

"There were also many servants in the Watrous house. Besides the overseer, 'vaqueros', herdsmen and hunters, there were a score of workmen and many women servants, both Indian and 'Peon'. There were the house maids, the nursemaids, the cooks, and the housekeepers, the old herb women who gathered plants from spring until fall to be used as foods, condiments and medicines. She was forever gathering, sorting, drying and storing away the little tied bunches of withered green and from them concocted medicines, teas, bitter and potent, salves, both smarting and soothing, and spices which gave a taste of epicurean extravagance to the simplest of soups and stews.

"When the househunter brought in a freshly killed carcass his responsibility toward it was over. There were men to skin it, to cure it and tan the hides and there were women to cut up the hump rib, if it were buffalo, to separate the back fat and strip the red meat into thin red sheets for drying.

"Life in the Watrous house was not as lavish as in the neighboring "hacienda" homes of the Spanish Dons. Samuel Watrous was still a New Englander and kept many of the inherited beliefs of frugality and simplicity. The women and children were not kept apart in a separate wing of the great house but mingled together, parents and children and servants, in cheerful domesticity. When the family went visiting they were not accompanied by outriders as was customary among the gentry of that time. This was a home ranch, not a feudal kingdom. Business was paramount. The children's natural apitudes toward trading were given an outlet. Maria Antonia, youngest daughter, liked to embroider buckskin, and as her father had learned to tan and dye it from the Indians he and his daughter set up a tailorship in connection with the store and made buckskin suits to order for freighters.

"The Watrous family in its growing-up days was a happy combination of New England discipline and Spanish ease. One thing Samuel Watrous held to was his dislike of early rising, so he easily slipped into the Spanish habit of chocolate or coffee and "bollas" in bed every morning. Breakfast followed at a later hour and was a heavy meal of meats of several kinds, choice of hot breads, cheese, and perhaps a vegetable.

"In 1849 his daughter, Mary, who was only twelve years old, married her father's partner, William Tipton, who had come into the valley about two years before. Early marriage in those days was more than an idle custom of the country. Life was precarious and the more protection a girl child had, the greater were her chances of living. For a daughter of a wealthy family, it was almost a necessity that she have a male protector whose interest would be solely hers in case death overtook the father. Then, too, marriages often united families, giving greater wealth and prestige to the members within them.

"New Mexico had now become a territory of the United States and the citizens were under the protection of the United States Government. Troops were sent in to enforce that protection. In 1851 when Colonel Summers came in to take command he found the military encampments in deplorable condition due to their contact with temptations of the towns and civilian life. For this reason he immediately disbanded these posts and created new ones far from established settlements.

"Fort Union near La Junta Valley was one of the new forts and it was made headquarters and principal depot for supplies for all the other forts. The surrounding fertile valley ranches found a ready market at the fort for all the grains and forage that they could produce. The trails over which the military

troops and their supply freighters traveled from the Missouri river to the fort and from the south and west to the other forts all joined at Watrous. This meant that hundreds of ox and mule teams, hundreds of freighters, muleteers, drivers, escorts, and travelers passed yearly by the store of Samuel Watrous. His store was doing a thrifty business and in order to keep up with the demand for beef he had to increase his herds rapidly.

But all was not perfect happiness in the homes of the valley. Although the soldiers were stationed at the fort to keep down the Indian menace they could not do so. There was almost constant trouble with the Indians and with renegades. The Utes were friendly but the Commanches respected no man's property.

On the Canadian River, eleven miles up from old Fort Bascom, near the present town of Tucumcari, he had established another ranch. After the ranch houses and the corrals were completed Watrous went to La Junta Valley to visit his family and while he was away a Commanche war party made a raid on the place. They killed the overseer, drove off his men and took possession of everything that they could lay their hands on: cows, calves, steers, mules, horses and oxen and a year's provisions. They burned five large freight wagons and all belongings, destroyed all the farm implements and after setting fire to the high grass departed as suddenly as they came.

Later in the same year the Apaches, going by on a wild horse hunt, raided the home ranch, capturing the herders and running off about forty-five head of horses. The soldiers from the fort trailed the Indians, but did not succeed in capturing them. Watrous understood there was but one way to end these depredations. He went to Washington to ask that the agency for the Indians be moved away from Cimarron to a more suitable place because there was no game left there on which they could subsist and, naturally, they had no food. His request was ignored.

Not only were friendly Indians fed and made welcome, but those from neighboring 'rancheros' came down from the mountain hamlets and were fed and befriended also. One day they came with tales of a stranger who had come among them. They called him the 'Solitary One'. He was, they said, a holy man who had come to them to preach, to heal, and to perform miracles from his cave on the rock peak of Rincon de Tecolote. Watrous was interested in all men. He went up the mountain trail to visit the stranger.

"And from the first a warm friendship existed between them. The 'Solitary One' was a nobleman from Capri who had spent more than a half a century in traveling the world, he was a religious fanatic but he was a deep thinker and an extremely remarkable conversationalist. Watrous enjoyed being with him, listening to him and exchanging ideas. Early in their friendship they made agreement that so long as a light could be seen at Watrous from Hermit's Peak all would be well with the mountain dweller, but when the light went out help should be sent. For ten years Watrous never missed a night, going himself or sending someone to the rise behind the great house where the flare on the peak could plainly be seen. A night came when the flare did not burn and Watrous himself rode up the trail next morning to learn what had happened to his friend. He found a group of wailing natives and a rude charcoal scribbled message on a rock. The 'Solitary One' had gone among the Apaches seeking to aid them by bringing the word of God.

"These were troubled times. Not only the Indians were given to raiding and war parties, but the whole country was infested with white renegades and desperados. In the sixties Watrous and his sons subscribed many thousands of dollars for the capture of different bands of horse and cattle thieves. The thousands of dollars which they offered as a reward for capture was but a 'drop in the bucket' with the sums lost at the hands of these bad men. When these men were not robbing and plundering the valley ranches they went to the fort and ran off Government mules and horses from under the noses of the irate militia.

"The Coe gang, as notorious as any, through evidence presented by Watrous, was finally tracked and after a sharp fight was arrested at Dog Creek near the present station of Shoemaker. During the night the prisoners escaped, but later a posse again caught them near Cimarron and this time they took no chances, stringing the thieves on nearby trees.

"By this time Watrous and Son's store was one of the important ones on the Santa Fe Trail. Watrous and his son-in-law, William Tipton, had the contract for supplying beef to Fort Union and as there were about six hundred men garrisoned there at the time, they had to run immense herds. Watrous began to branch out, to have interests farther afield than the home ranch. He and Tipton and a man by the name of Rice became interested in a prosperous farm project in Colorado. Watrous and Tipton owned a twenty-wagon ox train in which they did their own freighting from the Missouri river.

"After the Civil War times changed on the great frontier. Scarcely a day passed, then, that travelers did not go by the Watrous house by the side of the trail. These travelers differed from the early adventurer, trapper and freighter; these came in wagons piled high with household furnishings, with chicken crates tied on the back and a straggling rib-showing milch cow in the rear. Men rode on horseback beside their cattle-yoked wagons and from within the wagons women and children peered out with weary curiosity. In the fifties the heaviest travel had gone by way of the Dry Cimarron for the mountain pass at Willow Springs (Raton, New Mexico) had proved as great a peril to the cumbersome wagons. But now had come Uncle Dick Wooton to build his road out of mountain rock and make the way passable. Therefore, little ranches grew up in the valley. The Indians had been brought back from the 'Bosque Redondo' and put on their own. The number of troops at the fort dwindled and there was rumor of disbanding the forts. This meant decline of demand for beef. The day of the vast cattle domain was soon to be over.

"Watrous with his customary vision saw this and turned his attention elsewhere. He reduced his herds and went back to planting trees. He and his sons put in their first improved orchard. They sent to Stark Brothers for trees of German prune and early Richmond cherries. As the southwest wind prevailed, and they were bad for orchards, Watrous protected them by planting wind breaks of quick growing willows. He had proved to himself that tree-lined ditches lost less water by evaporation so he had all the irrigation ditches lined with trees.

"The Watrous place had always been more of a home place than a cattle domain, but now more and more it took on the appearance of a vast farm.

"The time had come for fencing so Watrous fenced. His was the first fencing in Mora County.

"He tried growing hops and the venture was successful. The yield was a thousand pounds to the acre and brewers pronounced it equal to that grown in New York State, which had always been considered the best.

"Watrous experimented setting out winter wheat, timothy and red top together with New Mexico wild grass. He sowed over a hundred acres of alfalfa, the seed costing twenty cents a pound. This was the first alfalfa in the valley and perhaps the first in New Mexico. On this he fattened forty steers and sold them in Las Vegas for almost sixty dollars a piece.

"By this time Watrous' children were married. He stood among his sons-in-law a grand old man, the head of the House of Watrous. His sons, Joe and Samuel Jr., and his son-in-law, William Tipton, were his partners in business. James E. Johnson, husband of Maria Antonia, was the first settler at Shoemaker. Gregg, another son-in-law, had the first stage coach station at Sapello, near Watrous. Kroenig, who had married another daughter, was the man who caused the discovery of copper on Baldy; he now had a ranch adjoining the Watrous place. Wildenstein, also a son-in-law, was an Austrian, a designer and a civil engineer.

"In 1879 the Santa Fe railroad came through, cutting the county from north to south. It was that year, also, that the woolen mill was started. It belonged primarily to Watrous, his sons, and his sons-in-law, although there were others interested in it. It was located in Cherry Valley, now Shoemaker, on a two hundred acre tract. A three story stone building was the factory proper and in addition there were 'adobe' living quarters for the workmen, store-rooms, corrals, and stables. Power was supplied by an overshot wheel on the Mora river. The factory wove blankets, carpets and capes. Many of these can be found today in the hamlets along the Sapello. The factory was a financial success, but after five years dissention arose among the sons-in-law. The head of the House was firm with the sternness of a New England patriarch. He said 'Peace, or I will shut the mill down.' And this he did, although all who were interested in it lost heavily. The factory was closed and it remained closed. Between a night and a morning the water wheel on the Mora was stopped forever. It never turned again.

"This was in 1884, just fifty years after the coming of the young New England boy to New Mexico. It had been a fruitful fifty years; it had been fifty years of growth, of experience, and change.

"The man's life did not end here. He lived for many remaining years among his children, his grandchildren and his trees.

"In the valley of La Junta he accomplished many more things. Many more things happened to him. His life was rich and full, and when he had finished with it he discarded it like an old cloak that he had outgrown, that had become useless and full of holes. He went from one epoch to the next with firm unaltering steps. Having the courage of his convictions, he never looked backward. And perhaps the greatest thing that Samuel Watrous did was the planting of trees up and down La Junta Valley where the Sapello meets the Mora."

"Fifty Years of Change", Clark, Anna Nolan, New Mexico Magazine, February, 1938, p.p. 15-35.

The house is still used as a ranch house by Mr. Croley, who purchased the ranch from the Watrous estate in 1920.

References:

Manuel Lopez, Watrous, New Mexico;
James E. Johnson, Shoemaker, New Mexico;
Mrs. Zellie J. Murphy, Shoemaker, New Mexico;
Lawrence A. Tamme, 11 Blatt Building, Santa Fe, N.M.;
William Kronig, Watrous, New Mexico.

Trent Thomas

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Approved Oct 18 1940 John Gaw Meem

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